

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Rebecca E. Sparrow, January 24, 1902

January 24, 1902. Dear Miss Sparrow:—

Your note of January 20th has given me great pleasure; and I believe that your proposition to give a phonetical literature to our deaf pupils is of enormous importance to the advancement of speech teaching in America and other English speaking countries. The unphonetical nature of our English spelling is a stumbling block to the deaf in their attempts to acquire speech. In Germany the ordinary spelling conforms so closely to the pronunciation that every book a child reads is a lesson in pronunciation. The spoken forms of the words are constantly presented to the eyes of the deaf in a clear and unambiguous manner by the ordinary literature of Germany and Italy, for example, and I have no doubt that this has been an element — and a large element in the success of the oral method of instruction in these countries. In English speaking countries, however, we spell the pronunciation of a by-gone age, so that written words do not depict to the eyes of the deaf the pronunciation we labor to impart to them.

If we could only supply the deaf with a great deal of reading matter printed in phonetical type the pronunciation would be impressed upon the minds of our pupils in a manner that could never be accomplished by oral instruction alone.

I have long had in view the very idea upon which you are working — the printing of stories and reading matter generally, in Visible Speech symbols. I had my old pupil George Sanders trained at Rochester to print the symbols, and I established him in a 2 printing office of his own here in Washington, with the object of doing just what you are now beginning to do; but, when the time came to put the plan into operation I was startled to find that the punches, and matrices and type, which I had made many years ago, had disappeared, and for this reason it has been impossible for me to carry out the plan

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intended. The printing office has therefore been discontinued and George Sanders is now in Philadelphia upon the staff of the Review.

This has been a great blow to me. My father is now a very old man, and I was anxious that he should see his system pushed, and know that the labor of his life had not been thrown away. It is therefore with great pleasure that I note that the Visible Speech type in the hands of Mr. Westervelt are to be used, and you may be sure of my best assistance and interest in what you propose to do.

In relation to the use of the symbols, I do not think we want to use a stereotype form of pronunciation. We should allow the same latitude in spelling words phonetically to the eye that we tolerate in actual pronunciation; hence, I would say let us have uniformity in the use of consonant elements, and in the use of vowels in accented syllables; but, let us tolerate differences of spelling in the vowels of unaccented syllables. Indeed, in regard to these latter, indefiniteness of vowel quality is a characteristic, and our pupils sometimes fail to make themselves understood because they attempt to give definite vowel sounds to unaccented syllables.

3

I am much interested in your letter, and will try to answer your questions in detail when I return the Visible Speech proof. I am busy today upon other subjects, and cannot give this matter attention, and simply write to acknowledge receipt of your letter and to tell you how much pleased I am that you are taking the matter up.

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell
Miss Rebecca E. Sparrow, School for the Deaf,
Rochester, New York.